

Thank you Paul Labovitz for your introduction - and your constant energy! Thanks to Paul Martin from the Science Museum for hosting, and to Katie Nyberg from the Mississippi River Fund. And finally, thanks to the McKnight Foundation for their generous support of this forum, and to the National Park Service and the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area for bringing us together.

From where we sit today, our stretch of the Mississippi River is a treasure to behold. But one thousand miles down river, an ecological disaster is threatening the entire Gulf coast of the United States - including precious wildlife habitat and a fragile ecosystem that millions of Americans depend on for their livelihoods.

This week, top Obama Administration officials briefed Members of Congress on the oil spill - the news was not good and getting worse. It is estimated that over two-hundred thousand gallons of oil per day are spewing into the ocean with no immediate end in sight. The Gulf Coast finds itself in the midst of another disaster - but instead of an act of God, this is a colossal failure of man. That's another inconvenient truth.

It is amazing how one hole in the ocean can so quickly convert a handful of Southern governors on the Gulf Coast to environmentalism. In the summer of 2008, I remember hearing the chant, "Drill Baby Drill," on the floor of the U.S. House, and at a large gathering just down the street at the Xcel Center.

You do not hear as many chants these days. As it turns out, "Spill Baby Spill" isn't very catchy.

There is a lesson in this crisis - it is that environmental protection, responsible regulation, and consistent enforcement is the ongoing responsibility of government. That work is never finished. When resource extraction or exploitation occurs in environmentally sensitive areas - and strict regulations are not in place and enforced - balance will eventually be lost causing damage and costing a lot of money.

As this disaster is showing us the results can be environmentally and economically catastrophic. Our existence on this planet depends on achieving a balance between

responsibly using our precious natural resources and protecting them. That challenge is as serious and immediate for us in the Upper Mississippi River as it is in the River's delta.

Every one in this room shares the responsibility for this portion of the River. You are here today because you value this treasure and you accept that responsibility. This forum is evidence that a new conversation about the future of the Mississippi River has begun - and not a moment too soon.

Now is the time we must be asking ourselves some important questions:

- What Mississippi River will flow outside these windows in 2020 or 2030?
- How clean will it be?
- Will it be more accessible for recreation and exploration?
- What new threats does it face?

These are the questions we need to start asking - and preparing to answer - today. There is no time to waste because the River is a living thing and we all want to keep it alive. Yes, the Mississippi is always changing, but we either come together to shape a vision for its future and fight to make that vision a reality, or we accept the uncertain alternative. In either case, change is coming.

History shows that we can improve the River when we have a plan and make it a priority.

- In the 1930s, a navigation system was built along the corridor, making the Mississippi River the vital artery of commerce it is today.
- In the 1970s, the federal Clean Water Act was passed and the work of restoring the River's

environmental integrity was started.

- And in the late 1980s, my predecessor, Congressman Bruce Vento succeeded in creating the Mississippi National River Recreation Area.

MNRRRA was visionary. It not only preserved habitat along hundreds of miles of the Upper Mississippi, it reconnected us to the River again.

Now it is our turn. So I ask you: what's next? That is a big question because there is a lot at stake. And it is a difficult question to answer because so many of us care about the River and want our say about its future.

In most instances, Minnesotans are a humble lot. But we get a little puffed up when we talk about the Mississippi River. A certain pride of ownership is understandable with the headwaters just up North. In fact, sometimes we forget that this is not just our River.

It is an American icon. Ten states are fortunate enough to touch the "Center of the Universe" as the River makes its journey from Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico. Water from 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces drain into its basin - making it the largest watershed in the U.S. The Mississippi shapes everyday life for more than 11 million Americans in communities along its banks, including our own.

St. Paul would not exist without the river. This city was founded to serve as a major link in the transportation of people and goods because of its location as the head of navigation on the river. This river valley served as a major route for Native American migration, exploration of the West and settlement of the frontier. The Mississippi River quickly became our country's main natural artery of commerce and continues to be a working river today. One of the Mississippi River's newest industries is also its fastest growing - tourism. Visitors are drawn to the hundreds of natural, cultural and commercial amenities that dot the Mississippi corridor.

The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge, which stretches for 260 miles along the banks of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, is visited by more Americans than Yellowstone National Park. The proud story of the Mississippi River is full of history, culture, and commerce. But we can never forget that the River is something much more tangible. The Mississippi River is the primary source of drinking water for 18 million people - including for all of us living in St. Paul and Minneapolis. For us, the Mississippi River is life.

Instead of pointing to the crisis in the River delta, we need to wake up to the crisis in our own community:

- Industrial pollution did not disappear with the passage of the Clean Water Act.
- Agricultural run-off is still the biggest polluter - as Dave Legvold explained.
- And a new threat from endocrine disruptors and other so-called "contaminants of emerging concern" are down-right scary.

A recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey found that seventy-three percent of the smallmouth bass collected in the Mississippi near Lake City had sexual abnormalities. Dr. Deb Swackhamer from the University of Minnesota raised this issue to my attention. With Deb's help, I amended the National Water Research and Development Initiative Act to include research on endocrine disruptors. Together, we reshaped the bill so it would focus on water quality, and not just water quantity. Some of these new threats need careful study and a precautionary approach. But other sources of pollution, whether they come from urban industry or rural agriculture, are well known and must be addressed without further delay.

The challenges of ridding the Mississippi of pollution and planning for the future of the River are significant. The good news is we have a partner again in Washington. The Obama Administration is bringing new energy - and new resources - to this effort. Last fall, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a new Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative to address the "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico and protect our water supplies. This Initiative will be funded with at least \$80 million each year for the next four years. The President's budget for fiscal year 2011 also proposes a \$17 million effort to address non-point source pollution in the Mississippi River Basin. As a Member of the House Appropriations Committee, I am working to support these and the President's other investments in environmental quality.

The solutions for protecting and restoring the Mississippi River won't come from Washington. But the federal government must be a partner with state and local efforts. I have been working since 2003 make the federal government a full partner in the Mississippi River. Last year's Interior and Environment Appropriations bill included a directive to the National Park Service to

conduct a study evaluating options for the preservation and interpretation of the natural, historical and cultural resources along the entire Mississippi River corridor. The study will be an opportunity for advocates and local and state government units to collaborate with the Park Service. The National Park Service has confirmed the initial planning stages of the study are now underway. As soon as next year, they will begin gathering input from stakeholders along the basin. This study is only one step.

Let there be no doubt - there is finally leadership on Mississippi River policy coming from Washington. Still, the real change will be driven at the state and local levels. The real leaders will be found in watershed districts and habitat groups. Some of the most important commitments will be made in county boardrooms and city councils. The science that will inform our decisions will come from university laboratories. And the motivation to act will be driven by the advocacy community. It will take everyone working in partnership. Partnerships start with commitments. So today, I will make a commitment to all of you.

I will be a partner for you in Congress. I am ready to work with you to jumpstart a new national commitment to the Mississippi River corridor. That will require vision and determination from partners here in Minnesota. Your ideas and advocacy will be essential to successfully mobilizing the political will to address the real needs of the Mississippi.

So, back to my question to all of you: what's next? I am looking to you.

Just one suggestion as you get started - big rivers require big dreams.